

Affective Labor and Faculty Development: COVID-19 and Dealing with the Emotional Fallout

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Like most centers for teaching and learning (CTLs) in 2020, ours has been engaged in continual, responsive support during the COVID-19 global pandemic. In addition to offering our rapid, knowledgeable, and evidence-based instructional development approaches during this time, we found affective skills—compassion, empathy, and listening—surfaced as crucial components of educational development during this time and during a time where CTL staff themselves were experiencing many of the same emotions. Our experiences offer a familiar snapshot for many CTLs; our center’s ethos of support not only embodied technical and instructional design expertise but also our institutional Jesuit value, caring for the whole person, needed to be at the forefront of our response in ways not seen before and with breaks few and far between.

Introduction

In March 2020, our center for teaching and learning (CTL) moved to the forefront of our institution’s response to COVID 19 and led the campus through our pivot to emergency distance online instruction. As the spring moved into summer, it became increasingly clear that Fall semester would not mark a return to business as usual. CTLs, instructional design units, academic technology units, IT support units, and more were all dealing with the sudden pivot underneath the lingering global uncertainty of COVID-19. Our (Lee’s and Susannah’s) prior roles as digital learning specialist and senior curriculum designer were subsumed into a massive effort to prepare an entire campus for a fall that no one had experienced before. And while maintaining (rightly) a focus on pedagogy, what remained under-examined was the emotional labor that had been asked of us during that time in order to

ensure the success of the emergency online pivot and the move into an uncertain fall and beyond.

Affective/emotional labor has long been studied within various professions, but primarily service professions. In *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (2012) defines emotional labor as work that is done to "induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (p. 7). As for affective labor, Hardt and Negri (2004) differentiate it from other kinds of emotional labor as follows:

Unlike emotions, which are mental phenomena, affects refer equally to body and mind. In fact, affects, such as joy and sadness, reveal the present state of life in the entire organism, expressing a certain state of the body along with a certain mode of thinking. Affective labor, then, is labor that produces or manipulates affects.... One can recognize affective labor, for example, in the work of legal assistants, flight attendants, and fast food workers (service with a smile). One indication of the rising importance of affective labor, at least in the dominant countries, is the tendency for employers to highlight education, attitude, character, and "prosocial" behavior as the primary skills employees need. A worker with a good attitude and social skills is another way of saying a worker is adept at affective labor. (p. 108)

Ahmed (2010), in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, takes the concept of affect one step further in staking the claim that affect is "what sticks" and goes on to show how affect shapes societies, norms, and our worklife. In other words, emotional labor is what we are asked to manage within ourselves, while affective labor involves managing other people's emotions. What we are being asked to do, in our roles and the affective labor that comes with it, is to work to ensure that the university continues to function smoothly, that we shape the way our faculty approach the upcoming semesters in order for students to have well-designed learning experiences. As put by Grandley (2000), "Emotional labor, then, is the process of regulating both feelings and expressions for the organizational goals" (p. 97). As the two concepts (emotional/affective) have evolved in parallel and with much overlap in definitions, the two terms will be used interchangeably throughout this essay.

Emotional labor is very much still under-theorized within higher education more generally (Lawless, 2018) and faculty development more specifically (Kelly, 2015). Sloniowski (2016) explores affective labor in the library

profession, and her mission to explore this under-theorized and under-discussed issue mirrors our own. Substitute “librarian” for “faculty developer” and we can understand why this kind of examination is important because it “acknowledges dependence on the often invisible pink collar labor of academic librarians in [knowledge and education] production processes” (p. 647). Pivoting online in 2020 also incurred a pivot in how our CTL roles were viewed; no longer were we just enhancing teaching and learning processes. The roles of CTLs, based on what we were hearing around campus, expanded toward language such as “saving” our institutions and the instructional continuity as “resting on our shoulders.” Forms of immaterial labor, affective/emotional, and what it took to make ideas “stick” drew us to examine our efforts as faculty developers in the online pivot. While one of the authors of this piece has previously written about affective labor under COVID-19 for faculty development and academic technology staff (Bessette, 2020a; Bessette, 2020b), we chose to focus this essay on the particular forms of difficult affective labor we experienced under tremendously uncertain circumstances.

Our roles are categorized as “staff”—neither administration (with the power as administrators to create and enact policy) nor faculty (with the protections of tenure and mechanism to resist and influence the administration). Instead, we have in many instances become the avatars for the administration, the face of policies being implemented, the voice of the decisions in our daily educational development work. This tension has been explored and problematized previously (Broscheid, 2019; Holmes et al., 2012; Manathunga, 2006, 2007), but the feelings that come from that tension, the affect of managing those tensions in order to ensure the desired “buy-in” from faculty, of enacting policies that one might not agree with (proctoring software, for example), were all the more heightened.

It is our goal, then, to surface various forms of affective labor implicit in our work during the rapid transition to remote instruction in the spring and summer of 2020, as well as the preparation of faculty over the summer for an uncertain fall semester. We then consider ways to recognize and compensate for the affective labor experienced in educational development. This is meant to be the beginning of a much broader conversation around the kinds of work expected and even required of us within our institutions and how that work could look moving forward. Our day job during the pandemic was to ensure that approaches to online or hybrid course design practices “stick,” but our experiences represent a snapshot of the life of a CTL during

a pandemic and our specific observations as to where affective labor is most needed.

Our Center's Context and COVID-19 Response

Centers for teaching and learning on campus were never designed to serve the entire campus. Largely voluntary services for faculty and programs form the cornerstone of these CTLs, and so while they are meant to support entire campuses, CTLs mostly serve faculty who seek out support. We work in an established center (celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2020) with a healthy reputation on campus. Our programming is based on bespoke cohort models, small hands-on workshops, intensive design work done in small teams over long periods of time, and on faculty's willingness and motivation to participate. We are staffed that way, too, with numbers not to serve every single person on campus, but every single person (usually, only a small percentage of the total faculty) who wants to interact with us. Like most CTLs, our center existed in the margins of our institutional culture working "between cultures and groups" on campus (Little & Green, 2012). That was our composition before March 16. After COVID-19 moved us to a remote environment, a phrase heard often in staff meetings included, "the future of this university rests entirely on your shoulders," as we faced the realities of what it means to keep an institution running. We work at a private institution and thus are not reliant on state budgets that have been ravaged by lost tax revenue and unexpected expenses due to COVID-19, but like most universities, the institution faced a windfall during the spring 2020 online pivot. While we recognized the economic realities of what this meant for our institution, the centrality of our work to the continuity of teaching efforts changed the narrative of support on a scale not seen before.

Our summer focus for support included serving as many departments as possible on a weekly basis. Instead of our typical long, intensive design processes extending over months to accommodate faculty schedules and workload, we now attempted to help all faculty on campus to redesign their courses over the summer—those who voluntarily took advantage of our programs prior and those who were new to our CTL. Instead of well-staffed, hands-on workshops for custom support and guidance, we offered pedagogical support and the training on the technology to support it. We built short cohort programs, templates, webinars not because it was necessarily the best way, but it was the best way we could do it given time and staffing constraints. The entire repertoire of responsive offerings were completed with

the high level of professionalism for which our CTL is known. For our more consistent summer offering, we designed a short course design institute constituting 10 hours of plenary presentations, conversations on design, engagement, and assessment with individual consultations. In any given week, our CTL accommodated between seven and 10 departmental sessions. At the time of our writing this article in July 2020, we (Susannah and Lee) each had facilitated five design institutes in consecutive weeks. While the sessions totalled 10 hours of contact time for faculty, preparation for each week, preparation during the week (happening in the margins), plus synchronous time with each cohort totalled close to 30 hours per week for us. Each of us approached each design institute with a similar mindset: In order to do this well and to make it “stick,” we were committed to investing our time in making the materials as relevant and specific as possible to each department and the individual concerns of faculty members.

On any given week there was a wide range of experiences present in the room. As we said before, some faculty had not crossed our threshold before; others were familiar with the LMS yet were looking for more advanced features and manipulation of it. It is important to note the speed at which we worked during the spring while looking ahead to implications for Fall 2020; administrative decisions were communicated by email and disseminated in staff meetings simultaneous to our consultations, often leaving us to interpret and decipher these emails with faculty in our interactions—even when we ourselves were trying to make sense of each shift and change in approach and policy. Faculty, understandably, wanted answers, and while we all had access to the same information, our design consultations became spaces where considerations of pedagogy and technology entangled with deciphering the ever-changing policy decisions issued during this time. These consultations often led to frustration, concern, and minimal concession to the common refrain of “We just don’t know yet.” Despite our own uncertainty, we needed to maintain a facade of calm assurance with the faculty we were working with while also absorbing their own frustrations and suppressing an outward expression of our own same frustrations.

On top of this constant churn of watching institutional decisions unfold, we were also faced with confronting the multiple biases regarding online teaching as an inferior form of learning (Bessette, 2020c). Connected to other unfamiliar terrain, such as rapid weekly decisions and online teaching, was the global pandemic, racial tension in the U.S. following George Floyd’s murder, and the personal concerns regarding family members or close friends affected by this very large, very weighing context. All of these layers

entered our weekly course design institutes with the faculty members. After a summer of working with close to 1,200 faculty members through our center's programs, we shared many of the same concerns that surfaced in our interactions with faculty; yet, in our roles, we expended an enormous amount of attention to remaining calm and confident so that our faculty might also take up the act of being calm and confident. We sensed that expectations around affective components of this work were heightened during a time when we too felt the multiple layers of worry, tension, and concern shared by faculty.

Affective Labor Within Our Work

Within these dynamic, rapid design conditions, exacerbated by societal and global contexts, we catalogued features of affective labor. Many of our observations mirrored the faculty concerns we faced on a weekly basis: sense of emergency, uncertainty, and working within persistent unknowns. In this new responsive working climate, affective labor, trying to manage, to shape, and to motivate productive emotions to "stick," comes dramatically into play. While we want the conditions to change, to ease, the only thing we can control are our emotional responses to the situation, especially while working with faculty, whom we need to be open, creative, collaborative, and flexible not just in the moment we are working with them but throughout the semester as they engage with their students and the ever-changing pandemic conditions.

Emergency Collaborations

Our center for teaching and learning is unique in that we were already an integrated unit that served three main areas in the institution: educational development, online learning design, and academic technology support and development. Prior to COVID-19, while we worked under the same unit, these three areas were largely siloed, dedicated to each respective unit's priorities, be it serving endowed programs in wellbeing and inclusive pedagogies, working with programs to develop online and hybrid courses and MOOCs, or supporting faculty using the various enterprise solutions for academic technology, such as Canvas (our LMS). As part of our adaptive response to summer preparation, these silo borders dissipated, allowing for our 40 staff members to work together, with varying degrees of experience in digital pedagogy and academic technology.

We were now working with colleagues with whom we had not had the opportunity to work alongside before. For each weekly course design institute, the facilitator team consisted of one staff member from each silo plus a coordinator, often one of our graduate student associates. We were also now having to quickly figure out how to best work with different units across campus, units that were also struggling with how to deliver their services to students and to faculty at a distance, as well as ensure that we were all delivering the same messages and information. These collaborations included the library, our IT division, our academic support unit, and various other student- and faculty-facing support units. As elements of a large research-intensive institution, various colleges and schools had largely acted independently to develop their own services for their faculty and students, but now they looked at our CTL for guidance and collaboration.

Developing productive working relationships takes time to understand different approaches, perspectives, and worldviews. In our engagement with faculty, we did not have this time, therefore forcing us to quickly and effectively react and spontaneously create an environment where we all could be productive and foster productive experiences for faculty. Thankfully, everyone had the same goal of supporting the students and ensuring their success and wellbeing, but we still had to manage our own emotions, frustrations, and anxieties in order to achieve these shared goals. We became not only the technical and pedagogical support, but also the emotional support for overwhelmed and anxious faculty and staff while also smoothing over any tensions that existed or cropped up during these emergency collaborations.

***Working with Unknowns:
Not-Yetness, Flexibility, and Preparing for Fall***

It does not need to be said the extent to which uncertainty pervaded each weekly course design session much less the entire summer of 2020. Faculty questions about the LMS or conference software revealed underlying frustrations often aimed at us; yet, we had the ability to redirect their frustration to their faculty senate, union representative, or other representative body. Faculty have open forums with their deans. And while educational development staff and other university staff have forums and outlets as well, our staff forums are (understandably) concerned not with issues that involve pedagogy or teaching and learning but with issues that concern *all* staff, most of whom work in non-academic roles. What we are trying to get faculty to

embrace beyond the LMS and tools is a state of mind or adaptive mindset, one that is more at ease in these spaces of uncertainty, what Ross and Collier (2016) call “not-yetness.” This was especially true when we did not know the modality for Fall semester yet we were conducting weekly design institutes meant to address all eventualities. As facilitators we were caught in between our own internal state of “not-yetness” and an outward appearance of certainty. “We got this” was our confident, external façade to faculty and departments, while “this” was still being debated and defined in decision-making spaces beyond our access. And there is no outlet for expressing this frustration beyond internal staff meetings, where it may be cathartic, but no real structural change can happen.

Infusing Flexibility

With the notion of “not-yetness” comes the idea of developing approaches to online and hybrid teaching with embedded elements of flexibility. In what often seemed like an impossible task, we guided faculty as much as possible to effective pedagogical practices, to strategies that promote flexibility and adaptability. There was a four-week period during the summer where hybrid or “hyflex” plans were discussed as a possibility for the fall in a good faith effort to bring certain student populations back to campus. The term “hyflex” (Beatty, 2020; Miller et al., 2014) gained traction at committee and administrative meetings. The term garnered curiosity among faculty, a feeling we addressed weekly based on what we knew from the existing literature. The questions remained as persistent as our answers: “What does HyFlex look like?” We don’t know. “How will it be decided who gets to teach on campus and who teaches online?” We don’t know. “How many students will be in the room?” We don’t know. “How can I design my course if I don’t even know what format it will take?!” Without an answer, we needed to soothe the faculty’s anxiety, listen to their frustration, and then try to pivot them into a more productive emotional space where they were open to discussions around creative pedagogical strategies that move beyond modality. This situation often led to discussions on personal health risks being asked of faculty to teach in hyflex scenarios. Where the spring pivot had us relying on the simplest of technological solutions, the hyflex scenarios pushed faculty (and many times us) toward the edge of what it meant to be flexible as part of our work. Planning for flexibility might have been implicit in working with faculty before, yet imbuing flexibility as a feature of course

planning in a socially-distanced world required imagination and a leap of faith for all involved.

Fall 2020: Snapshot of Uncertainty

Now that faculty know us, how will our interactions continue? Will we be the ones they turn to for issues with the technology, a role usually for IT support units? What sort of programming do we need to offer to support faculty during the semester and beyond, thus becoming a sort of emotional support center? There is both opportunity and terror at the heart of these questions. In some ways the university culture we witnessed in these course design sessions posited both the faculty and the academic developers in marginal spaces where we were all working to ensure students have a place to return to at some point. We were all interpreting the emails sent from administrators imploring faculty to move from emergency teaching mode to semi-permanent modes of online/hyflex with the imperative to improve student engagement. Most recently, design conversations quickly turned into discussions around personal safety, equitable experiences for students, and how engagement strategies really enact inclusion in socially-distanced spaces. Deviating from a flexible workshop structure, we waded into these conversations as supportive faculty developers with as many questions as, if not more than, the faculty members.

Given the nature of our work to prepare for the Fall 2020 semester, we felt that we pieced together an adequate, context-specific response to supporting faculty, yet we cannot even begin to imagine how our supportive roles will take shape for the fall. Initial evaluations from our emergency response mode indicated faculty “feeling prepared”; nevertheless, there will be a need for continued conversations and reflections on what was implemented, how it went, and what to do next—steps we see as critically important in enabling everyone to brace for what’s ahead. During the responsive course design institutes, we were given the gift of interacting with departments and individuals we had not met before forging tenuous relationships around teaching and learning in the fall.

Certainly, our CTL cannot go back to what we were doing before, and we are trying to predict what faculty will need, what our students will need moving forward when we cannot even predict what the fall or the spring will look like. We are left in a position where we are still constantly reacting, rather than being proactive, a position that describes our new role at the center of maintaining the inner workings of our institution.

Moving Forward

We started writing this reflection in mid-July, 2020. At that time, ICE announced that international students could not stay in the country if they were taking the majority of their classes online; and the number of COVID 19 cases exploded in a number of states that re-opened seemingly prematurely. When you are reading this, who knows what will be happening in the steady rise of COVID-19 cases, Portland, or as a result of the U.S. Presidential election. As the news and state of the country and the world shifts and changes, so too does our work, in reaction to whatever new normal comes to pass, and for however momentarily it lasts.

Amundsen and Wilson (2012) conducted a systematic review of the evaluation of CTLs, looking at skills gained and contexts in which development and uptake of new ideas is effective. In looking at the positions of CTLs in institutions, Amundsen and Wilson question the contextual nature of faculty learning as an under-researched area accounting for “how this learning is actualized and embedded in the academic workplace.” A new question emerging from their review asks, “What are the key features of faculty development that make it effective?” (p.112), to which we would add “What are the key features of faculty development that make it effective *during a pandemic?*” Our answer would resoundingly point to the crucial role of affective labor for faculty, for our partner units, and for ourselves. We were juggling so many emotional shifts in an effort to help our faculty, students, and institutions survive and in many cases thrive during a very challenging, difficult time period.

Once everyone on campus has done a workshop on the various academic technology tools, what comes next? As with other things these months of the pandemic and racial activism have surfaced, we have come to see more than ever that the affective labor of educational development is visible, tangible, and an integral part of supporting our institution, especially in this next academic year. Collectively, we have decades of experience and expertise across faculty development, inclusive pedagogies, and digital learning. We were responsive to this moment in higher education because of this expertise, knowing the affective aspects of resistance to change in faculty development. Like most things in 2020, we could not have anticipated the scale at which affective labor factored into our daily work. We see this as an opportunity to cross from communicating grievances to acknowledging affective labor as a legitimate part of our work and our workplace, especially as we move into the next academic year. We need to make space not only for the

pedagogical, reflective conversations to take place, but also the space to really discuss and examine the emotional labor we were all performing. If we are to truly build on the goodwill we have accrued on our campuses through such massive, responsive support at scale, then we need to be able to recuperate, plan, and strategize. We will not continue to be successful in supporting our campuses if we do not.

“We are all stressed out/under pressure/in a pandemic” erases the very real *work* that faculty developers did for our campus communities in the service of larger organizational goals. Our central point maintains that affective labor exists at work, it is integral to our work, we do our best work because of it, and we need to address it and incorporate it into our conversations about workload and expectations. Despite the chaos and uncertainty, faculty developers (and multiple partners within the institution, to be sure) were called upon to maintain a level of professionalism, to be willing to pivot on a moment’s notice, and deliver not only “service with a smile” but also service in the name of compassion to help ensure that students would return in the fall and beyond. Affective labor takes time to understand and unpack as a needed skill, one that takes time to develop but also to be responsive to. We need to be able to recognize the kinds of work we are doing, how we are doing it, what that work entails, and how to invest in and commit to each other to maintain high levels of affective labor during unprecedented times.

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